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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Roewer, R. (2020). Three Faces of Party Organisation in the National League for Democracy. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 38(3), 286-306. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103419898913>

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# Three Faces of Party Organisation in the National League for Democracy

Journal of Current  
Southeast Asian Affairs  
2020, Vol. 38(3) 286–306  
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DOI: 10.1177/1868103419898913  
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Richard Roewer<sup>1,2</sup>

## Abstract

The National League for Democracy (NLD) is a decisive actor in Myanmar's ongoing political transformation process and yet a clear understanding of its structure is absent from the discourse on the party. This article analyses the NLD based on Richard Katz's and Peter Mair's "three faces of party organisation." It examines the relationship between the NLD in public office, the NLD on the ground, and the NLD central office. The findings characterise the NLD as a highly centralised party in which most decision-making power is concentrated at the party's central office. Select layers of the party's network retain the power to influence important decisions, such as the nomination of candidates for elections. Yet, their ability to do so is due to the lack of rules and regulations. This article argues that the structure of the NLD is the product of the dynamics that governed the formation and development of the party under authoritarian rule. Fears of a partial authoritarian resurgence at the hands of Myanmar's armed forces (Tatmadaw) and the perception that its authoritarian structures constitute a competitive advantage within Myanmar's hybrid regime inform the NLD's decision to refrain from reforming and democratising its structure. Yet, leaving the party's structure unchanged stands to negatively impact the party's political profile and its role in Myanmar's political transformation process. In the long term, it might endanger the party's stability and contravene the party's political principles. The article draws on interviews with NLD politicians conducted during an extensive research stay in Myanmar from 2018 to 2019.

## Keywords

National League for democracy, political parties, hybrid regimes, Myanmar

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## Introduction

Until the National League for Democracy (NLD) assumed government following a landslide victory at the 2015 general elections, the party had largely been perceived as democratic. As such, the party was portrayed as the “good” democratic actor that stood opposed to the “evil” Tatmadaw (Zöllner, 2012). However, since the party formed a government in 2016, it has failed to stand up for minority rights (Weng, 2018), has supported the military’s scorched-earth response to the attack on border police posts in Myanmar’s western state Rakhine (Naing and Lee Yimou, 2017) that led to the renewed persecution and exodus of the Rohingya minority, has decided not to repeal repressive legislation such as Article 66(d) of the Telecommunications Law (The Irrawaddy, 2017) which is frequently used to silence critics, has made little progress in the country’s peace process (O’Connor, 2018), has seen a string of senior party leaders been tied up in corruption scandals (Frontier, 2019), and has been criticised for the increased centralisation of party structures (David and Holliday, 2018; Roewer, 2016).

For someone assessing the NLD without prior knowledge, based on its performance since 2016 alone, the party might seem akin to a façade-party: a party that purports to be democratic while harbouring authoritarian sentiments and using authoritarian tactics to increase its power for the sake of power and rent seeking abilities. However, such a categorisation would be misplaced. In some ways, the NLD is committed to furthering democratic reform, importantly the retrenchment of the military’s political influence. The NLD continues to pursue constitutional reform that might – in the best possible and very unlikely scenario – do away with the 25 per cent of parliament seats that are allocated to the military by default and its supervision of the ministries of home affairs, border affairs, and defence (Ye Mon, 2019). Moreover, in 2019, the NLD government took over the General Administration Department, formerly under the military’s oversight as part of the Ministry of Home Affairs, thus signalling that it can retrench the influence of the military.

There is, however, strikingly little research on the NLD. Only two English-language publications have focused specifically on political parties in Myanmar, explaining general party dynamics at the national and local level (Kempel et al., 2015) and providing insights on the classification of political parties in Myanmar (Stokke et al., 2015). Both make valuable contributions but neither focused on the structure and processes that characterise the NLD. Apart from the two aforementioned publications, research on the NLD has largely been published in the frame of broader questions (Aung Myoe, 2018; McCarthy, this issue; Walton, 2018). Moreover, a sizeable volume in Burmese chronicles the history of the NLD (Aung Shin, 2016). Yet, the latter focuses on the historical unfolding of the party’s development rather than an analysis thereof. It is also important to note that the author is a prominent member of the party, at times assuming the role of unofficial spokesperson. Nonetheless, U Aung Shin’s chronology is perhaps the only piece of writing that aims to provide a broad overview of the NLD and its history.

This article establishes a detailed account of the NLD’s structure and analyses the relationship of three key party faces: the party in public office, the party on the ground, and the party central office. This loose framework helps to establish where

decision-making power is concentrated and will illustrate how the structure of the NLD shapes the way the party works. The findings show that the NLD is highly centralised with most of the power resting at the party's central office but with a gradual shift towards the party in public office. It also shows that individual layers of the party's structure so far retain the ability to influence important party decisions, such as the selection of candidates for elections, but that this power comes from a lack for regulation rather than an effort to decentralise the NLD. In effect, the NLD's structure makes the party more authoritarian as it focuses decision-making power in the hand of very few senior party politicians and leaves little room for democratic practices. Interviews with such senior party politicians show that the decision to retain authoritarian structures within the party stem from a perception that such structures are advantageous for the NLD as long as it operates in a hybrid regime. Yet, these structures shape the party's understanding of democracy and thus ultimately stand to influence the party's actions in Myanmar's political transformation process. Lastly, a better understanding of the party also aids the classification of the NLD as a mass party with catch-all elements.

The data presented in this article are the product of extensive field research conducted in Myanmar over the course of twelve months, the analysis of party documents and fifty-five semi-structured interviews with NLD politicians in Nay Pyi Taw, Yangon, Mandalay, and Hpa-An.

### **Three Faces of Party Organisation based on Katz and Mair**

In their paper "The Evolution of Party Organizations in Europe: The Three Faces of Party Organization," Katz and Mair set out to explain the organisational change of parties by establishing three units of party organisation and exploring their relationship to one another. Doing so, they extend the disaggregation of parties beyond dichotomous categories such as "the party in government" and "the party in the electorate" or "the parliamentary party" and the "extra-parliamentary party" (Katz and Mair, 1993: 593). The idea of utilising more nuanced sub-categories in the analysis of parties was not entirely new at this point – V. O. Key (1964) distinguished between "the party in the electorate," "the party organization," and "the party in office" – but Katz's and Mair's categories are more differentiated and, despite their broad character, are more closely defined. Importantly, while Katz and Mair ultimately venture to apply their categories to examine the evolution of party organisations in Europe, their framework is not intrinsically tied to specific types of parties as is the case with other seminal accounts of political parties (Duverger, 1951). Thus, their approach lends itself to the application to parties that emerge in settings fundamentally different from those in Europe and the United States.

Analysis of these party sub-categories and an exploration of their relationship has merit in itself in so far as that it aids the description of important party characteristics, thereby exploring facets of the NLD that have thus far received little attention. Ultimately, however, the analysis of the party's faces must also aid its categorisation, that is, an assessment of the party's type. Here, it becomes apparent how the party types Katz and Mair produce (based on Duverger, Panebianco, and others) are also products of

Western political development and don't travel easily to cases with drastically different historical trajectories. Yet, engaging with these ideal party types is a first step towards coming up with better suited categorisations in the future.

Katz's and Mair's approach suggests that we should "consider parties as being comprised of a number of different elements, or faces, each of which potentially interacts with all of the others" (Katz and Mair, 1993: 594). Katz and Mair suggest three faces: the party in public office (i.e. in parliament or government), the party on the ground (i.e. its members and activists), and the party central office (i.e. its national leadership, in theory organisationally distinct from the party in public office) (1993: 594). Analysing the different faces allows us to explore the "resources and constraints of each face" (Katz and Mair, 1993: 601), the relationship between different faces, and the question of whether there is a degree of overlap between the faces. Katz and Mair's approach lends itself to an explorative analysis of the NLD precisely because it is general. Its scope is not limited to particular types of parties and its use is not restricted to consolidated parties or parties in the global north. Indeed, the only elements that parties are expected to have are the three faces. Katz and Mair do have more nuanced ideas about what the different faces ought to be and do. However, before exploring where the NLD conforms to general expectations and where it diverges from these, we need to establish an understanding of the party's structure which has so far remained vague.

## **The Organisational Structure of the NLD**

The vague understanding of the party doesn't stem from the lack of research alone but also from the misleading and inconclusive information provided by the NLD itself. The constitution of the party states that

The National League for Democracy is constituted as follows.

- A. The National Convention of the League
- B. The Central Committee
- C. The Central Executive Committee elected by the Central Committee
  - AA. Within the Central Executive Committee there shall be the Chairperson, the Secretariat, and the Central Executive Committee Members.
  - BB. There will be a Patron Team which is elected by the Central Executive Committee. The team shall be led by the Senior Patron.
  - CC. Regional/State Executive Committees
  - DD. District Executive Committees
  - EE. Township Executive Committees
  - FF. Ward/Village Executive Committees
  - GG. Central Women Working Committee
  - HH. Central Youth Working Committee

However, it does not provide much information on the relationships between the different levels of the party structure. The Central Executive Committee (CEC) is the most important organ of the party and currently has twenty-one members although the number may vary. Up to five people from the CEC belong to the Secretariat,

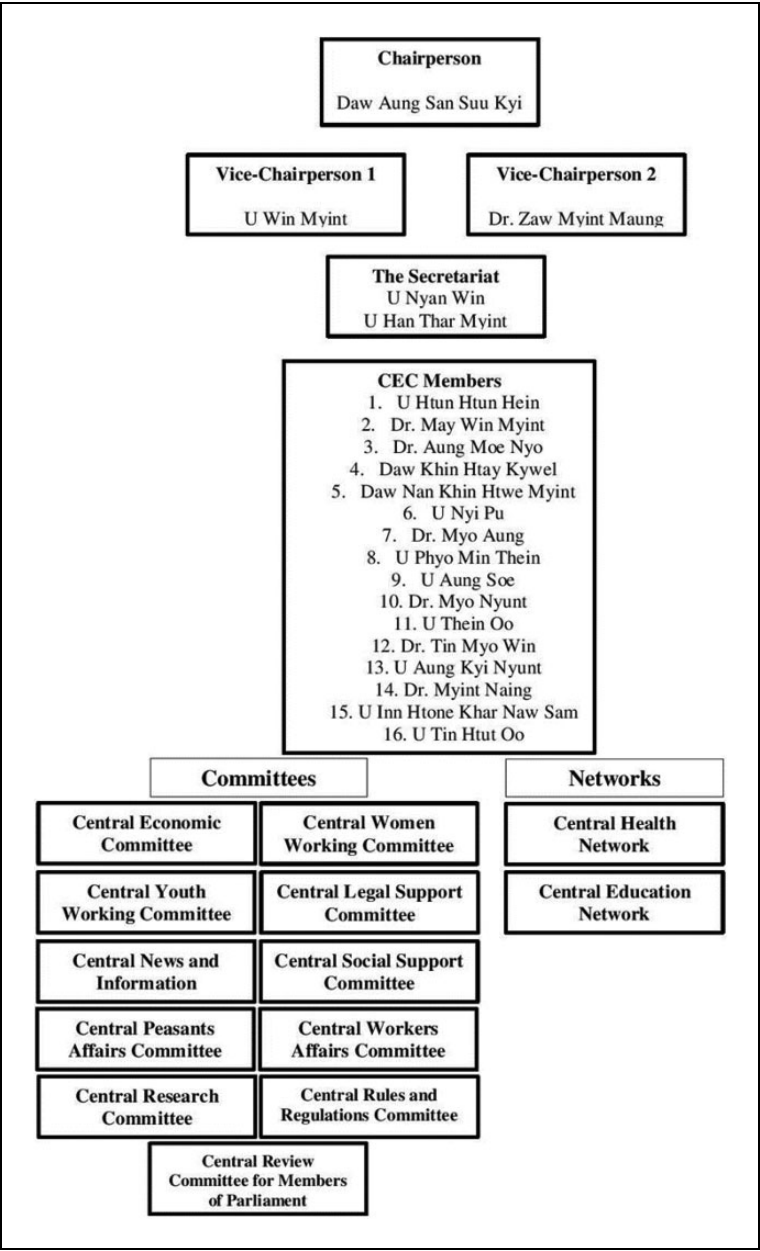
a separate grouping within the CEC but “these days, the functions and performance of the Secretariat are not clear anymore” even to NLD MPs (U Myint Lwin, 2019). It is generally presumed to fulfil a ceremonial role rather than bear responsibility for particular party domains. The CEC is advised by a team of party patrons, formerly influential party leaders and elders who are now exercising a reduced role in the party due to their advanced age and poor health or because other party leaders wanted to curtail their influence. While the patron team is tasked with providing counsel to the CEC, this process is not formalised.

The CEC itself is led by the Chairperson (a role currently assumed by State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi), a Vice-Chairman, currently U Win Myint, the President of Myanmar, and a second Vice-Chairman, currently U Zaw Myint Maung, the Chief Minister of the Mandalay Region. The central office of the party further includes eleven committees and two networks (see Figure 1). Each of the committees and the departments are chaired by a CEC member. Most CEC members are also members of the executive and legislative branches. This causes significant overlap between the party central office and the party in office. However, the interplay is somewhat regulated by Article 64 in Chapter 3 of the constitution that reads:

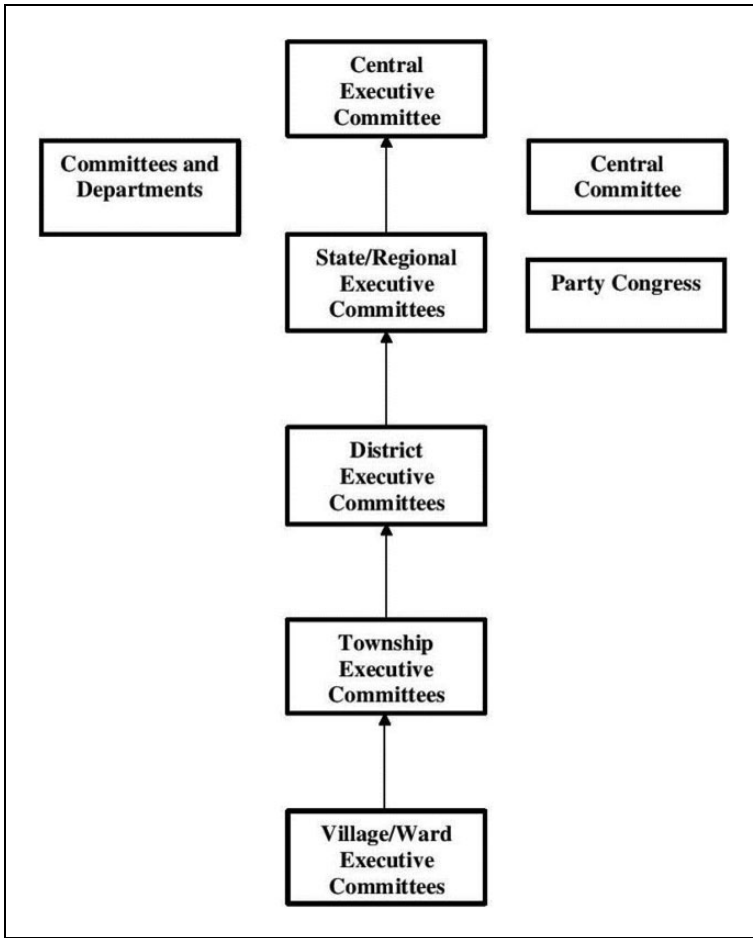
If the President or the Vice-Presidents are members of a political party, they shall not take part in its party activities during their term of office from the day of their election. (Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008, Chapter 3, Article 64)

Generally, members of the union level executive must refrain from involvement in party business. The constitution makes no mention of the State Counsellor since the position did not exist in 2008. Yet, since the State Counsellor is the de-facto head of state, it applies to the position regardless. However, Chief Ministers of the states and regions can freely influence their party’s business. Since the Chief Ministers are accountable to the union government, that is, the President and the State Counsellor, they also receive recommendations and instructions from them that they may pass on to the party. CEC member and Upper House MP U Aung Kyi Nyunt explained that “the union level executive party leaders don’t have the right to engage in party business and party management, but they can influence the party through the Chief Ministers, thus influencing the party passively” (U Aung Kyi Nyunt, 2019). Thus, they influence the decisions made at the party’s monthly CEC meetings although they are never in attendance. “In a way, he [Dr. Zaw Myint Maung, Chief Minister of the Mandalay Region, CEC Member and 2nd Vice-Chairperson of the CEC] is the most powerful and critical man in the party” (U Aung Kyi Nyunt, 2019).

This creates a juxtaposition of power in which the highest functionaries of the party’s central office serve as the highest executives of the party in public office but influence party business through the proxy of the Chief Ministers, who are themselves members of the party in public office, only on the state and region level. This might suggest that the true source of power in the NLD lies with the party in public office, but U Zaw Myint Maung begs to differ, stating that



**Figure 1.** The organisational structure of the NLD's central party office. *Source:* own compilation.



**Figure 2.** The general party structure of the NLD. *Source:* own compilation.

both the parliament and the government are below the party. I am in this position [Chief Minister of the Mandalay Region] because the party assigned me in this way. Who assigned me? The party. So, the party is above all of us. Below the party is the parliament. Below the party is the government. (U Zaw Myint Maung in M Bwe, 2019)

The notion that most of the party’s power is concentrated at the party’s central office is also reinforced by the communication channels that the party uses to guide its MPs. CEC member U Aung Kyi Nyunt explains:

We have party whips, three for each house. Since we have two houses we have six party whips. Then we have state and regional deputies for the union parliament. We have 14 states and regions and we have two houses, so we get 28 state and regional deputies. In the



CEC we have five members who are also in the Hluttaw – U Aung Kyi Nyunt, Daw May Win Myint, U Inn Htone Khar Naw Sam, U Htun Htun Hein and U Aung Soe. Those five CEC MPs meet with the 6 party whips and the 28 state and regional deputies every Monday to deliver the party leadership's line. The 28 deputies meet with their respective state and regional MPs [and inform them]. We [also] have a Motion Review Committee. It reviews the questions and proposals of the NLD MPs and influences the agenda of the Hluttaw. The six party whips advise the Motion Review Committee and make sure that they are in line with the decisions of the party leadership, although they are not in this committee. (Aung Kyi Nyunt, 2019)

Thus, most of the power is concentrated in the party's central office and specifically within the CEC. This becomes clearer still when assessing the role of the National Convention of the League (NCL) and the Central Committee (CC). The NCL is the NLD's party convention and takes place every five years. It first came together in 2013 and then again in 2018. In 2018, every township was allocated two seats at the NCL while each township had been allocated three seats in 2013. The selection of the delegates is made by the Township Executive Committee (TEC) and every member of the TEC can nominate themselves. If there are more than two nominees, the TEC will vote on the delegate. By way of an example, the Yangon Region, comprised of forty-five townships, could be expected to have sent 135 delegates to the party convention in 2013 and 90 to the party convention in 2018. Prior to the NCL, each township is asked to contribute suggestions for input. The townships can present these suggestions at a preliminary state and region meeting at which up to six representatives from each township can be present. If the suggestions are deemed important, they are compiled in a letter that is submitted to the NCL as the input of the respective region. More importantly, CC Members are elected at the NCL. In 2013, 120 CC Members were elected but rather than repeating the procedure in 2018 the party's leadership decided to avoid a full-fledged election and instead simply filled seats that had become vacant due to party expulsions, resignations, or because a CC member had passed away. The problem is that "there is no regulation and no term limit, you could say that once you are a CC member you could remain in the position indefinitely, if you are not expelled from the party" (U Myint Lwin, 2019).

This change in practice is significant because both the CC and the CEC must attend the NCL where the CC can vote on changes to the party's constitution and its rules and regulation, although this has not occurred so far. More importantly, the CC should suggest Central Executive Members and elect them. However, even in 2013, when all the then fifteen CEC positions were to be filled, the candidates for seven of the fifteen positions were suggested by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and it was generally accepted that these nominations were to be confirmed by the CC, which did happen. Since then all new CEC members have been selected and approved rather than elected.

The party, which is already highly centralised by design, suffers from the absence of a proper party constitution. "The party constitution was drafted in haste. It only has a thickness of half of my little finger. We started with this constitution. The leaders also knew that the constitution was not comprehensive and sufficient by any means.

However, circumstances did not allow drafting a systematic constitution and the systematic formation of the party based on such a constitution until 2011 when the party re-registered” (U Myint Lwin, 2019). But almost no changes have been made to the constitution since 2011, and thus many provisions about the organisation of the party and the responsibilities of its various parts remain vague or are not addressed at all. This ultimately strengthens the power of the members of the CEC and the Chairperson of the party.

The party’s organisation below its central organs, the CEC, the CC, and the NCL, unfolds like a tree in which the same structure is replicated at different levels. At the bottom are the Ward and Village Executive Committees of the NLD with 7–11 members, including a Committee Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary, Associate Secretary, Treasurer, and the News and Information Officer. The next branch up is the TEC with twenty-one members, including the aforementioned positions as well as two additional Youth Officers and a greater number of ordinary Executive Committee members (a set-up that remains the same for the higher instances of the party). The TECs report to the District Executive Committees, which in turn report to the Region and State Executive Committees. Thematic committees on a range of topics may be formed at all levels but there is too little information to provide a conclusive overview. In an idealised setting, they could be expected to replicate the committees of the central level, but it is not clear whether this is consistently the case.

Theoretically, all elements within this structure should be elected democratically. Yet the party’s constitution includes a remark noting that “although the elements of this hierarchy must be elected democratically in principle, if required by the circumstances, they shall be formed through democratic negotiation” (Constitution of the NLD). The remark serves to centralise the decision-making power yet again, effectively affording senior party officials the possibility of appointing party members to executive committee positions at the various party levels.

While junior NLD members and MPs sometimes try to pass off the party’s structures and practices as democratic, senior leaders within the party are well aware that the party is not operating according to democratic principles. The current *modus operandi* is rooted in the party’s development under authoritarian rule.

We have been practicing democratic practices since the party was founded, but it was never a good environment to exercise full democratic practices, so we never succeeded to the full extent. Since the party was founded, there was a need for the executive committees at the different levels and at the central level. In some states and regions, we were able to have meaningful democratic elections at all the levels but in some regions and states, with repressive governance surveillance we could not even have a comprehensive plenary party meeting or conference. So, we used to gather some people who were really active and they decided through semi-democratic voting, electing the people with the most prominent history of activism and the most sacrifices. Hence, we have different names for the party leaders – depending on the way in which they were elected. We only call those *executives* (အလုပ်အမှုဆောင်) who were elected democratically but for the people who were selected because they were the right man in the right place, we only call them *members of organisation committee* (စည်းရုံးရေးကော်မတီ).

Although we are improving a great degree, this practice remains until now. There are still not so democratic practices and procedures in the party – selection or election – mostly relating to the way in which executive committee members assume their places.

To answer your question on how the party leadership will decide when the time has come to fix the party constitution to secure rigid democratic procedures, there are three factors. Firstly, we are not an isolated organisation, we have interactions with politics outside of our party and the party is influenced by outer politics, which is not fully democratic in all of Myanmar, we still have 25% of military personnel in the Hluttaw. I call it a competitive advantage to still retain that kind [undemocratic] element in the party. Secondly, we need to consider the maturity of the organisation, how familiar it is with democratic norms and to what degree party members at all different levels share democratic values. Third, we have to consider the democratic literacy, the maturity of the understanding of democracy by all the people in Myanmar. (Aung Kyi Nyunt, 2019)

These observations suggest that most of the power is concentrated at the party central office and yet there are important differentiations to be made that become clear when analysing the party through the lens of Katz and Mair's "three faces of party organisation."

## **The Central Office of the NLD**

The NLD's central office conforms to many of the expectations that Katz and Mair outline. It consists of two overlapping groups, the national executive committee (in this case the CEC) and the central party staff. Indeed, members of the first group "may be recruited in a variety of ways. Some may be elected by the party congress, or in some other way appear to represent the party on the ground, others may be representatives or leaders of the party in public office; still other may be representatives of ancillary or affiliated organizations. In many cases, not only will the top party bureaucrat be an ex-officio member of the national executive, but (s)he may appoint several other officials who become ex-officio members as well. In other words, despite appearances, the national executive of a party may be less a representative body than a self-perpetuating and autonomous element of the overall party structure" (Katz and Mair, 1993: 599).

The central party bureaucracy is clearly under the control of the national executive, which is the dominant force in the party central office. However, the power of the national executive is curtailed by the power of the chairperson of the executive, who has significantly more influence than ordinary CEC members. Katz and Mair further note that key resources of the party in central office are its "centrality, expertise, and formal position at the apex of the party organisation. To these might be added that many of its members are leaders of other faces of the party" (1993: 599). The latter remark is especially relevant in the case of the NLD whose three highest party bureaucrats also occupy some of the most important positions of the party in public office, namely State Counsellor, President, and Chief Minister.

Katz and Mair suggest that this dynamic can also become the weakness of the party's central office, if the leadership is divided. Specifically, Katz and Mair imagine that such divisions might occur because "members of the party executive are likely to owe their position to different faces of the party, and have to maintain the support of their

individual constituencies if they are to remain in the central office” (1993: 599). This notion, however, does not apply to the NLD since members of the party executive are selected by the executive itself rather than on the basis of support in the party on the ground. Yet, working in this way without significant political and personal tensions is only possible due to the unparalleled authority of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. It is not far fetched to assume that divisions might be caused by the selection of party executive members once the party has a chairperson that commands less respect. Katz and Mair further note that another possible constraint of the party central office is that it can neither make nor implement policy on its own. While this is theoretically true in the case of the NLD, the practice of the party proves otherwise with the motions of its MPs and the general questions of party policy being decided by the CEC.

The NLD’s central office does perform further functions that are identified to be primary by Katz and Mair, albeit to varying degrees. According to Katz and Mair, “the party central office may be the core of the initial party activists who go out into the country and organize a party on the ground that eventually fields candidates who win elections and become the party in public office” (1993: 600). This dynamic holds true for the NLD in so far as that the party central office does supervise the work of the party on the ground through rules and regulations. However, it does so passively rather than actively, offering specific guidance only in cases where party offices in the country are of particular relevance (e.g. due to a large-scale infrastructure development), and allocating resources only for the resolution of the most pressing (and widely publicised) issues.

The NLD has established rules and regulation for executive committee members at the various levels that further illuminate their responsibilities. These rules and regulations commonly include a section on the objectives of the work of the executive committee member, most importantly the cooperation with executive committee members at the higher and lower levels. The documents also contain a code of conduct that reminds executive committee members to be respectful and to abstain from corruption, among other things. The duty and responsibility section of these briefs focuses on the importance of organising regular executive committee meetings, the reading of the reports of the higher and lower levels, assistance in fundraising, regular office opening hours, oversight of party membership procedures, and the monthly budget plans. Furthermore, the executive committees at the district level and the township level must aid the work of the NLD representative for the respective region and carry out organisational tasks during elections.

The party central office does coordinate the national campaigns of the party although it does not have the capacity to supervise the campaigns of individual candidates. Moreover, the party central office supervises the party in public office but not on behalf of the party on the ground, like Katz and Mair suggest, but because the party’s decision-making power is centralised at the party’s central office. Katz and Mair further suggest that the party central office may provide services such as media relations, policy research, and fundraising support. But while the NLD’s central office theoretically provides these services, the party’s capacity is so limited that few party offices will be able to benefit from them.

## The NLD on the Ground

Following Katz and Mair, the party on the ground includes members, “but more loosely it can be taken to include the core of regular activists, financial supporters, and even loyal voters” (1993: 597). At the national level, the party on the ground is manifested by the party congress with “established rules to fix the number and types of officials, their competence and terms, etc.” (1993: 596). Yet, although such rules exist in theory, they are not implemented in practice and the NLD’s party congress, the NCL, has little influence over the party’s course.

Katz and Mair note that “there may be some individual incentives for membership and activity in the party on the ground – the local party office may serve various social functions for its members, local leadership positions may confer some status, activity may put the member in line for rewards of patronage or nomination to office (and thus, if successful, membership in the party in public office) – the primary incentives for members of the party on the ground are public purposive (policy), symbolic, and solidaristic” (1993: 596).

Indeed, the promises of status, patronage, and power have been informing an influx of members to the NLD on the ground. While membership had predominantly been symbolic and solidaristic in the past, the party is struggling to cope with a new type of member, who – without much ideological affiliation to the party – seeks to utilise it for the maximisation of power and status. Like few others, this issue illustrates the fragmented power dynamics in the NLD. On the one hand, the party’s central office can and does nominate candidates for seats in the two houses of the union parliament and the houses of the state and region parliament. On the other hand, the central office’s selection is dependent on suggestions from the party on the ground due to the immense numbers of candidates the party fields and due to its unparalleled electoral success. At the same time, the central office’s capacity for oversight and control is limited, with the office often remaining unresponsive even when complaints are filed at the local level. This semi-guided and semi-controlled space leaves much room for political manoeuvring that breeds a diverse range of possible paths from ordinary NLD member to member of the party in public office. As is common practice for parties everywhere in the world, the party central office might select candidates for constituencies outside of their previous political domain. However, the NLD takes this to the extreme and candidates might sometimes only visit their constituency after they have been elected. This is possible because voters chiefly vote for Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD rather than a particular candidate or policy agenda. Since the resources of MPs are limited by a comparatively small salary and there are no additional funds available for maintaining an office in the constituency, the relationship of the MP and the constituency can be minimal. Thus, MPs will have to rely on the support of the local NLD office, the township and region and state executive levels and their own financial resources. As could be expected, the quality of interest representation through MPs thus varies significantly.

Yet, often the party’s central office has no fixed suggestion for the nomination of a candidate. In such cases, it might ask the Regional and State Executive Committees, who in turn act on recommendations from the TEC. Moreover, the chairman of a TEC can

lobby the party's central office for the candidature effectively. Firstly, because the position serves as a reference that signals the support of the local electorate since the chairman is elected by the committee. Secondly, because only a handful of people at the central office are responsible for the vetting and selection of candidates, thus elevating the effect of intelligently designed interpersonal relationships.

In the run-up to the 2015 general elections, the NLD's central office placed much importance on the increase in membership numbers. Being able to sign up many new members in a township became a reference that could aid one's ambitions to join the party in public office. Consequently, there were cases where local NLD officials went through villages and towns, signing people up for the party and offering to pay for their membership fees (100 Kyat for the application form and 300 Kyat for the photograph, a total of USD 0.26). Although the membership fee is small, being able to pay the fee for a multitude of new members suggests a financial advantage that might be considerable, especially in rural areas. The NLD has since diverted from the idea to increase its member-base by all means possible but not without damage done. Local NLD members who were able to support the mass sign-up financially also commanded a basic form of support from the people they signed up, meaning that they had an easy way to becoming local party officials. Moreover, party members who signed up because they were persuaded rather than due to their political stance might be more easily swayed by material incentives from candidates in the future.

This dynamic was exacerbated by the fact that Village and Ward as well as TECs work almost without supervision. In theory they should be supervised by the next level instance of the party bureaucracy, but in practice this is seldom the case. Thus, TECs might have fewer than the prescribed number of members, might only meet irregularly or otherwise fail to act in accordance with party regulations. This made "hostile" take-overs of local committees easier, ultimately affecting the selection of candidates for the party in public office and eliciting a reaction from the CEC that is likely going to centralise the party further in the future.

This is our weak point. We let the township CEC nominate the representatives. Some people who participate out of self-interest made alliances in the party. Some township was selected by the vote. Let's say if a township party has 16 or 17 working members, and if a person can make 10 alliances within the group then that person can be a representative. Another weakness is the funding of the party. If a person in the township level can support someone within the group, this person will be popular among them. Then he can be selected at the township level, then again at the regional level. This is not the weakness of the central working committee, but the weakness of the township level. This is the weakness of the bottom-up selection. We need to change the process. (Daw May Win Myint, 2019)

Katz and Mair note that the party on the ground may at times conflict with the party in public office because "adhering to formal statements of party policy and identity are likely to be of a great significance" (1993: 598). While this is true in the case of the NLD, it is also largely insignificant because the party does not have the capacity to follow up on violations of its party line or its regulations unless they have a significance that is uncharacteristic for most offices of the party on the ground. Katz and Mair also

point out that “members of the party on the ground will certainly see winning elections as preferable to losing [but], the sacrifices they are prepared to make for that end may be quite limited” (1993: 598). Again the observation only applies in a limited sense to the NLD in Myanmar’s present political landscape. While being an NLD member or activist could lead to hardship in the form of oppressive measures by the military in the past, members today have to sacrifice little to nothing for being members and since the NLD’s popularity is unparalleled, the party is an effective vehicle for assuming office, whether locally, regionally, or nationally.

As described by Katz and Mair, the party on the ground’s most effective tools are its own labour and its local patronage abilities. Its ability to mobilize is another important factor, specifically for the NLD whose central office may at times use the party on the ground to drum up support for the political undertakings of the party in public office. For example, if local economic elites oppose an infrastructure development that the party has put forward, it will urge the party on the ground to instigate protests in favour of the project. Doing this effectively is one of the key strengths of the NLD vis-à-vis other parties and provides the party on the ground with an opportunity to make a significant contribution to the implementation of political projects of the party in public office.

## **The NLD in Public Office**

The NLD’s time in public office started with the party’s landslide victory in the 2012 by-elections, when it won forty-three of forty-four constituencies in which it competed (of a total forty-eight vacant parliamentary seats). The party won four seats in the Amyotha Hluttaw (House of Nationalities), thirty-seven seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw (House of Representatives), and two seats in State and Regional Hluttaws. Importantly, Aung San Suu Kyi won a Lower House seat and three other members of the party’s CEC were able to secure seats (Tin Maung Maung Than, 2013: 210). The by-elections made the NLD the third largest group in parliament, after the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the group of military representatives, constituting 6 per cent of all parliamentary seats and 11 per cent of the seats in the Pyithu Hluttaw (Tin Maung Maung Than, 2013: 213). Interestingly, the comparatively weak position as the opposition in parliament only formed one side of the party in public office at the time. As would be expected, it was difficult to remain true to the party’s campaign promises of establishing rule of law and making Myanmar more democratic through the common tool of the legislator, that is, through the making (and un-making) of legislation. Aung San Suu Kyi was appointed chairman of the then newly formed Committee for Rule of Law and Peace and Stability (Tin Maung Maung Than, 2013: 214) and came to chair an investigative commission for the Letpadaungtaung Copper Mining Project, but overall the formal influence of the party in public office was limited. Yet, at the same time the party’s victory at the polls had far-reaching implications for the country that consolidated a positive view of the NLD as a force for democracy. Firstly, the sheer fact that the elections were mostly free and fair, that the party had been allowed to contest, and that the result had been accepted was an indication that Myanmar was indeed on its way to democracy. Secondly, economic sanctions imposed by Western nations were first



suspended and later lifted, leading to accelerated economic growth in the subsequent years. Third, the NLD's victory, in general, and Aung San Suu Kyi's victory, in particular, served as starting points for increased communication and cooperation between Myanmar and the western nations who had imposed sanctions before. Heads of state from European Union (EU) member states and the United States were eager to visit Myanmar and to endorse the work of the NLD, which seemed to provide a confirmation that democracy was still the most desirable form of government. Thus, the NLD in public office won significant influence not through its actions in parliament but rather through the broader political developments that took place in the wake of the party's victory. Fourthly and importantly, Aung San Suu Kyi enjoyed the attention of President U Thein Sein and senior officials in his administration, and due to her role as a political icon in Myanmar had significant influence over the public discourse.

The combination of these factors meant that the NLD had a virtually untarnished image when it started campaigning for the 2015 general elections, even though it had little formal influence on the government. Thus, the landslide victory of the NLD at the 2015 polls came without much surprise. The party won 79 per cent of the elected seats, affording it a majority of 59 per cent – 60 per cent in the Amyotha Hluttaw and 59 per cent in the Pyithu Hluttaw (ICG, 2015: 3). Moreover, the NLD won three-quarters of all elected seats in Myanmar's seven Burman-majority regions and the seven ethnic states (ICG, 2015: 4).

The electoral victory, despite the insignificant formal role of the NLD in public office, exemplifies a dynamic that remains virtually unchanged today, namely that the NLD is not elected based on its party platform or campaign promises but because of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's saint-like image and the party's profile as the opposition to the former military regime. According to Katz and Mair, "the key feature of the party in public office is that, at least in democratic countries, it is dominated by those who have themselves been successful in elections" (Katz and Mair, 1993: 595). The statement is true for the NLD, but its implications are different. The NLD in public office is not constituted by members whose main quality lies in being able to win elections in the sense that they have a compelling election campaign but rather by members whose main quality is their membership in, and loyalty to, a party that is widely popular due to the role it played in Myanmar politics prior to it assuming public office. Similarly, Katz and Mair's notion that members of the party in public office might seek power and status or wish to pursue particular policy objectives is only true in a very broad sense. Some members, especially newer ones, might have joined because they sought to improve their social status and it could be said that all members pursue a particular policy objective. But the NLD's *raison d'être* is the further limitation of military influence over the political domain in Myanmar. The single policy objective that unites the NLD in public office is its wish to retrench the influence of the military, and not a programmatic policy.

Yet, since political practice in Myanmar is impossible without cooperation with the armed forces, members of the NLD in public office are "more likely to see compromise as incremental movement toward a desired goal rather than as partial retreat from a correct position" (Katz and Mair, 1993: 596). Indeed, this notion is the single major source of tension between the NLD in public office, the NLD central office, and the



NLD on the ground. Moreover, the NLD in public office is thought to be constrained by the need to win elections as “this means that they must be attentive not only to the electorate, but as well to those who control the resources necessary for a successful election campaign” (Katz and Mair, 1993: 594). Unfortunately, the lack of transparency around political donations makes it impossible to outline the ways in which the party is constrained but since the party has few sources of funding it can be assumed that it must engage with donors who might expect political returns for their support. For Katz and Mair, the party in public office is further constrained by its obligation in government, that is, by a sense of responsibility towards the electorate. Once more the statement applies to the NLD only in a limited sense. The party has been criticized heavily for its failure to deliver any of its campaign promises, and its political decisions have alienated some of its key foreign supporters such as the EU and the United States. Yet, within Myanmar the failure to live up to its campaign promises only has a limited effect because many voters did not vote for the party based on its party platform in the first place. Therefore, the NLD so far only needs to retain its image as the only viable opponent to the military and the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party to enjoy the continued support of the electorate.

The NLD in public office benefits less from its ability to make governmental decisions and instead focuses on political manoeuvres that have little chance of succeeding, like its bid to reform the 2008 constitution, but that have high symbolic value. However, this approach will not remain successful indefinitely and party will need to place more emphasis on the development of its party platform to remain competitive in the future.

## **The NLD – A Mass Party with Catch-All Characteristics**

Katz and Mair apply the characterisation of the three faces of political parties to their trajectory of organisational change and adaptation. Doing so, they highlight three questions. Firstly, the extent of resources and constraints of each face. Secondly, the independence versus interdependence or, more generally, exchange versus autonomy. Third, the question of the degree of distinction or overlap between the three faces.

Yet, explaining organisational change within the NLD is not the purpose of this article. Indeed, it might be argued that one aspect that characterises the NLD is the lack of organisational change in the party. After all, the NLD is still governed by a party constitution that has seen few amendments or elaboration since the party's foundation. The lack of organisational change – for better or worse – is not entirely unjustified because decades of repression robbed the party of the possibility of institutionalising further.

Yet, Katz' and Mair's question prompts are not necessarily tied to the question of organisational change. Rather, they can help explore the dynamics shaping the party in even greater detail, thus, allowing us to assess whether and how the NLD corresponds with different party types. Because of the scope of this article I will focus on the party types suggested by Katz and Mair: the cadre party, the mass party of integration, and the catch-all party.

Traditionally, these party types present a sequential party development. Political parties have either adapted and transformed from one type of party to the next or have

been replaced by parties of the “next type in line.” The NLD, having been founded in 1988, is, however, neither a particularly old party nor was it founded within the frame of an existing party system. The party’s foundation and its development are intrinsically tied to the political upheaval that took hold of Myanmar in the late 1980s. The NLD’s development therefore was not simply shaped by its political agenda and its ability to secure support for it, but also by its relationship with authoritarian incumbents. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that aspects of the NLD correspond to multiple ideal party types at the same time. The NLD, like any other party, is not a unitary actor that remains fixed to a certain type throughout its development. Considering the party’s trajectory, it could be argued that the early NLD was founded as a mass party of integration with catch-all party elements.

The early NLD fits the mass party type so well because the following is true for the party: “an initial group of organizers forms a ‘central office’ which then goes about creating the other two faces of the party” (Katz and Mair, 1993: 603). Thus, “the intervention of central leadership is always a necessary catalyst in turning a mass into a movement or party (...)” (Katz and Mair, 1993: 603). Not only did the NLD form the CEC early on, the party’s founders also set out to recruit a figurehead that would enable them to accrue public support – Aung San Suu Kyi. However, the NLD was born out of the 8888 Uprising and many of its earliest members and candidates had participated in the protests or had a role in organising them. Thus, the early NLD – growing rapidly – recruited people who were already politically active, and expected a higher degree of participation in the management of the party’s affairs. The party had a wider appeal to constituents because it served as the opposition to an unpopular authoritarian regime that had led the country to economic disaster. In the political context of Myanmar in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it would be too simplistic to assert that the party “arose primarily among the newly activated, and often unenfranchised, elements of society in their (ultimately successful) struggle to gain a voice in, and eventually control over, the ruling structures of the state” (Katz and Mair, 1993: 603). The NLD didn’t cater to a specific group of constituents that had been disenfranchised politically but rather to a broad electorate that was alienated from the existing government and wanted change above anything else. By way of its appeal to voters, the NLD always has tried to present itself as a catch-all party that defines its constituency through the shared goal of the removal of the Tatmadaw from the political sphere rather than socially or culturally.<sup>1</sup> The political situation had other effects too: the NLD’s constitution highlighted the important role of the National Convention – the party’s congress – but the party did not operate in the way that was stipulated by the constitution. Competition with the authoritarian incumbents led to increased surveillance and repression of the party, ultimately rendering top-down decision-making through the party’s executive the method of choice.

In theory, the mass party has a party executive that supervises the party, and which is elected by the party congress. In the case of the NLD, however, the executive of the party was not (and is not) elected. Moreover, the executive of the party also made up the party that was supposed to become the party in public office, that is, those who successfully ran as candidates in the 1990 elections. Prior to the 1990 elections, there was a high degree of overlap between the party’s faces. Many MP elects first had a strong rooting in the party

on the ground, having supported the foundation of the NLD from the bottom up. While the party was coordinated through its central office, the party on the ground was of paramount importance because of its sheer capacity to mobilise voters in high numbers.

The dynamics in the NLD changed in the aftermath of the annulment of the 1990 elections. As the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) refused to let the NLD form a government, many of the MP elects argued that the party should proceed to form a government regardless. For a brief period, it was unclear which way the party would lean but the party's leadership ultimately opted for a more conciliatory approach, thus asserting the strength of the party's executive. Since the party's leadership was not in favour of large-scale protests against SLORC, the party on the ground lost a significant amount of its relevance. More importantly, the repression of the party in subsequent years – throughout much of the 1990s and 2000s – essentially deprived the party of two of its faces. Its leaders could not be elected and the party on the ground could only operate within limits. The party central office was the only face that remained operational for most of the time, although it too went through periods of “hibernation.”

When the party declared its intention to re-register in 2011 and to contest the by-elections in 2012, it was clear that it retained wide-spread support in the electorate and that the party would be “revived” through the central office. By virtue of the nature of by-elections, the party's success in 2012 only gave way to a small party in public office that had little formal influence. Only the aftermath of the 2015 general elections has seen a shift of power within the NLD and a greater distinction between the party's faces as the party in public office has become significantly more powerful. So far, the high degree of overlap between the party in public office and the party central office preserves the power of the latter and ensures a relatively high degree of exchange between the party faces. At the same time, the party central office has far fewer resources and depends on the party in public office. One clear example of this is the NLD policy requiring MPs to donate 25 per cent of their salary to the party. The party on the ground is largely controlled by the party central office and its importance for organising rallies and support for NLD policies ensures its relevance. Moreover, the limited ability of the party central office to effectively control whether the party on the ground complies with party policies renders the party on the ground freer than it ought to be in the eyes of the party's executive.

## Conclusion

In their account of the organisational development of political parties in Europe, Katz and Mair indicate that the central offices of parties would become increasingly less powerful. Their suggestion proved to be well founded. The NLD however is far from retrenching the power of the central office. In theory, this might seem counter-intuitive: a party in public office as large as that of the NLD is expected to lessen the influence of the central office over party affairs. However, several reasons make this trajectory unlikely in the case of the NLD.

Firstly, the particular political setting of Myanmar as a hybrid regime in which the military still wields significant political power compels the party's executive to favour a highly centralised party because it increases the possibility of control.

Secondly, overlap between the party in public office and the party central office is extensive and many senior NLD politicians are members of both. The party's CEC supervises the party in public office in many instances, except for the most senior members of the party in public office, that is, the State Counsellor and the President.

Third, the NLD has so far not formulated a clear party platform. The defining political goal of the party remains the removal of the military from political power. Yet, because this is a broad ambition the NLD is host to a vast variety of political beliefs and perspectives. Acting as a unified party across the board thus necessitates increased control of its politicians, bolstering the relevance of the party's central office. Aung San Suu Kyi's role as the unifier of the party strengthens this dynamic: members might disagree on policy but comply because of her leadership. Thus, having a central party organ that acts on her behalf increases the coherence of the party.

In the political sphere of Myanmar, the NLD so far remains one of only two parties who try to appeal to constituents across the board, regardless of their ethnicity and social status (the other being the USDP). Yet it remains to be seen whether this catch-all characteristic of the party will remain in place in light of the party's new role in public office. While the NLD initially had strong support in ethnic minority areas, the relationship with ethnic political parties and voters in ethnic minority areas has deteriorated since 2015 (Paing and Roewer, 2018). Moreover, while the party effectively offsets its own political fragility due to the lack of a clear party platform with increased centralisation, it is questionable whether this will keep the party competitive in future elections.

The rigidity of a highly centralised party will likely not remain without internal consequences either. Many MPs are frustrated with their lack of political agency and it is expected that a sizeable number will not run for election again in 2020. A high turnover in the party in public office might in turn strengthen the centralised executive of the party even further because newly recruited members are less likely to challenge and reform existing structures. There is also a feeling within the NLD that the party's current organisation only works because of the exceptionally high level of unity that is inspired by its leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Senior NLD executives understand there is little else that binds the party together in its current form and are increasingly worried about the party's fate in a post-Daw Aung San Suu Kyi era.

Consequently, the NLD's structure and its increased centralisation might have far-reaching consequences. For the time being, it is unimaginable that the party will lose the support of the majority of voters in Myanmar. But the party's favour of centralisation over the development of a party structure that affords its members more political agency and fosters unity based on clearly defined political ambitions risks a party split that might endanger the future of the party and significantly change Myanmar's political landscape.

### **Acknowledgement**

The author is indebted to Ko Han Htoo Khant Paing, Ko Pyae Sone Aung, Ko Ye Yint Khant Maung, Ko Phone Htet Naung, and Ko Nyan Myo Aung without whose excellent work the project could not have materialised in this way.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Note

1. While the NLD has tried to present itself as a party of all people in Myanmar who seek political change, it nonetheless is defined by being – to a large extent – a party of the Bamar majority. Especially since the 2015 general election, the party has increasing difficulty to appeal to ethnic minority voters.

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